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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

BY F. M. COLBY

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FRAU MAYREDER'S *A Survey of the Woman Problem*<sup>1</sup> is a surprisingly peaceful and reasonable exposition of feminism. Sex-patriots are a fierce folk, be they feminists or hominists, and they have no patience with people who from cowardice or gross uncertainty have refrained from taking sides. That is why the usual treatise on "Woman, Her Cause and Cure," contains so little for us outsiders. It is intended as a missile for the contrary-minded, not as a message to those who have not yet made up their minds. Is Woman the supreme being whose "two strong arms are the pillars that sustain the universe" or is she a "capsule covering an emptiness which man alone can fill"? There is the naked choice. The usual writer on Woman would think it base to hesitate. Frau Mayreder has no such scorn for the undecided. Nor does she boil down Man and sum up Woman in these vast and awful simplicities. Moreover, though a feminist, she is a woman of peace, aiming at no sex conquest, but only at benevolent assimilation. No doubt it is these ingratiating qualities, rather than any great powers of thought or expression, that have given her her great prestige in Germany and are now prompting many English-speaking reviewers to exclaim that they never looked upon her like before. Her plan, or rather dream, of benevolent assimilation looks forward to a new and higher form of human being whom she calls "synthetic man."

The representatives of higher humanity in a monistic sense will be those whose psycho-physical constitution enables them to overstep the bounds of sexuality and to raise and increase the inward relationships between the sexes—those beings who are subject to the conditions both of the male and of the female—synthetic man.

<sup>1</sup>*A Survey of the Woman Problem.* By Rosa Mayreder. From the German by Herman Scheffauer. George H. Doran & Co.: New York, 1913.

This, however, is a long way off, and meanwhile she addresses herself to the task of removing the misunderstandings between the sexes.

There she does some good destructive work on the subject of Woman in General. Many pages of her arguments may be summed up in the single and apparently sound thesis that Woman, with a capital letter, is a myth, and only women are realities. Woman and woman, she says, are no more alike than man and man. After a careful study of men's general statements about Woman she concludes that Woman is merely a "subjective fetish of sex," having no existence outside the brain of the thinker. Goethe and Grillparzer, indeed, were frank enough to admit it. "My ideas of woman," said Goethe, "are not obtained from experiences of reality, but they are inborn or have developed in me Heaven knows how." And Grillparzer exclaims: "A woman, what might it be? . . . A something that is never anything, never nothing, just as I happen to imagine it—I—I alone." But almost all other distinguished writers have been quite sure about her. Frau Mayreder illustrates their confusion. There is Lotze saying that "the female hates analysis" and therefore cannot distinguish the true from the false. There is Lafitte saying that "the female prefers analysis." There is Kingsley calling her "the only true missionary of civilization," and Pope calling her a rake at heart; Havelock Ellis saying that she cannot work under pressure, and Von Horn saying that in the fulfilling of heavy requirements she puts a man to shame; M. de Lambert that she plays with love, Krafft-Ebing that her heart is toward monogamy; Brissac that "souls have no sex," Feuerbach that they have; Laura Marholm that "the significance of woman is man," Frau Andreas Salomé that woman is one "who endeavors to realize an ever broader, ever richer unfolding of her innate self"; Havelock Ellis that nervous irritability has ever been her peculiar characteristic; Möbius that women are "strongly conservative and hate all innovation"; Hippel that "the spirit of revolution broods over the female sex"; Lecky that woman is superior both in instinctive virtues and in those which arise from a sense of duty; Lombroso that there is "a half-criminaloid being even in the normal woman"; Bachhofer that "Law is innate in women"; von Hartmann that the whole sex is unjust and unfair; Nietzsche saying at one moment that women like George Sand and

Madame de Staël are of corrupted instincts and "merely absurd," and at another that woman alone has "intelligence" and men merely "emotion and passion."

From which partial list of contradictions it will be seen that Frau Mayreder is justified in thinking that writers on the subject are, to say the least, rather happy-go-lucky. Or, in her more elaborate language:

Woman as an abstraction, as a figment of thought, exists only in the brain of the thinker, and is absolutely dependent upon this—as the nature of thought demands; but woman as an individual exists for herself, and is as noble or as vile, as gifted or as stupid, as weak or as strong, as good or as wicked, as like to man or as unlike him; in short, as diversified as is made necessary by the very nature of the human species. How astonishing that this simple observation, confirmed a thousandfold by life and the representation of life, should only in the rarest cases be able to assert itself against the power of the subjective fetish!

And it is the same way with those sex-patriots who carry the fight back through savagery and the home life of the chimpanzee and bird-matings and bee society to the cell itself. No sure formula of Femininity can be founded on the qualities of masculine and feminine germ-cells, for even here partisanship enters and "we find little more than arbitrary suppositions, in which everything points in a direction agreeable to the writer." Some say that a self-assertive spirit is a mark of the masculine germ, while the feminine is, on the whole, passive and stable. Others taunt the masculine germ-cell for its "fusion with a larger self-contained organism like the ovulum," as a sign of that spirit of surrender and self-sacrifice "which has always been considered a particular distinguishing feature of the female nature." It is evident that people cannot forget the suffrage question or their own family affairs even when discussing a proto-zoon.

In short, we are forever attributing to sex spiritual and intellectual qualities that are not necessarily bound up with it.

If after we have stripped off all the influences of mode of life and occupation, of custom and extraction, and freed our judgment from conventional prejudices, and particularly from our own subjective tendency, we seek justification for all that may still be called manly or unmanly, womanly or unwomanly, then we will find at the bottom of our consciousness a feeling difficult to define. Taking concrete examples as guides, it seems quite clear that this feeling is not directed

against certain qualities. We do not regard as unfeminine the great women of history—a Portia, Arria, or Charlotte Corday, though their actions exhibit all the energy, resolution, and courage of a particularly masculine temperament; nor as “unmanly” the loving resignation, gentleness, and self-sacrifice by which many of the saints of Christian legend evince a distinctly feminine disposition. From this alone it is evident that in the higher ranks of personal perfection the ordinary psycho-sexual categories are no longer applicable. These divisions are more concerned with the externals of personality and the lower ranks of ordinary life. They leave unregarded an entire list of qualities which point to a personal distinction beyond all sex, as, for example, strength of mind, force of will, steadfastness, courage, reliability, etc. And in the moral ideal which Christendom has given to the world, chastity, humility, peacefulness, even the need of subordination to the guidance of a higher will, are all set forth as virtues irrespective of sex.

Frau Mayreder’s patient analysis of all sorts of things that do not bear analysis, of conventionalities, gentilities, feminine pucker, masculine swagger, poetical sentimentality, oratorical rant, and the various attempts of Peter the Pumpkin-eater to put True Woman in a pumpkin-shell, naturally convicts the world of a good many absurdities. And it would not have hurt the human race in the least if, while tidying up its mental confusion, she had smiled a little now and then; but not for a moment does she permit herself to be amused by anything in a world that has gone so hopelessly astray on sex questions. Toward nonsense in all its forms she maintains an attitude of extraordinary seriousness. She does not even call it nonsense, but envelops it in scientific-sounding terms that make it seem quite dignified. Let Michelet remark in a silly moment, “You must create your wife—it is her own wish,” and she straightway defines it as a “subjective erotic fantasy.” Some of the simplest and most familiar types of men disappear beneath her Greek derivatives. For example, there is he who swaggers a good deal in his own household and is “tame and feeble” everywhere else—he who for all ordinary purposes might with perfect adequacy be termed an ass. This simple definition by no means contents her. She says he “experiences a dyscrasy, or sense of discord, within him” and “between his sexual life and his career as a citizen there exists a latent contradiction which secretly is, perhaps, as great a trial to him as to the wife who is dependent on him.” A licentious, domineering man, a weak, passive, crafty, false, or ludicrous woman, is an *acratie* person—that is to say, a “partially developed being whose whole person-

ality is determined by teleological sex characteristics." They are exponents of "centrifugal sexuality." On the other hand, persons like the Christian saints are *iliastric*, "the highest type of centripetal sexuality." Better still are the *synthetic* folk above mentioned whose sexuality is an equilibrium of the centrifugal and the centripetal sexual tendency. She seems to have caught some bad verbal habit from almost every science she has studied, but she has no doubt suffered the most from sociology. Take, for example, the simple and familiar precept that women should advance in morality and intelligence so far as possible without shattering the outward decencies. What mind uncorrupted by the social sciences would conceal it under this?

To emancipate oneself from the ethical normative of femininity, which fetters individuality because of the teleological limits of sex, is a distinct right. But to preserve its formal quality is the task of a free personality.

As so often happens with the sociologist, words are cast over common little ideas just to prevent their capture:

That development of woman as an independent personality, of which the strivings of modern women are the expression, is attended in some cases by a dyscrasy of the feminine being—a bad mixture of the tendencies of the female striving for sexual subordination and the tendencies of her personality striving for independence. Such women, by reason of their erotic peculiarity, look for those very qualities in the man of their choice which they are least able to endure in their extra-sexual life.

But this is Frau Mayreder at her worst. She remains lucid for pages at a time and even her encumbered passages are often worth stripping to the thought within, for it is a book of wide views, the product of a singularly honest intellect. It is too bad that a good many persons, stunned by her language, will be unable to find this out. Of course, there may be some sovereign scientific virtue in all these dyscrasies, acrasies, *iliastrics*, and teleological psycho-sexual erotico-frigidities, and possibly there is a professor of something somewhere who would take to them as a duck to water, but for my part I cannot imagine what his subject would be.

As to the equality of the sexes, Frau Mayreder "concedes that the female majority type is not the equal of the male either in intellect or in strength of will." She adds:

The "equality" of the sexes in general is something which one should only consider in so far as it stands in relation to the right of individual

self-development—the absolute measure of comparison should only be used in cases where it is necessary to give judgment between two competitors of different sexes in one single contingency. None but the most partisan spirit, prejudiced either for or against, would fail to acknowledge that any equal achievement of the woman ought to be valued, subjectively, in a far higher degree, because of the greater difficulties, from within and from without, which she must overcome. Indeed, it may be said that one of the greatest acts of injustice that may be charged against those who uphold a supposedly objective valuation lies in comparing the feminine intellectuality in a historical sense with the masculine, making use of man himself as a masculine standard.

According to Frau Mayreder the days of the lady are numbered. Soon the term ladylike will be actually insulting. There is something in the very idea of ladyhood “that is incompatible with the concept of a free personality.” There is, moreover, “something antiquated, something quixotic,” about it. Sport has greatly damaged the lady because of its swift and violent movements which aim “more at sureness than at grace.” It “militates against the orthodox conception of the lady” that she should break her nose on a bicycle. And—

It is precisely in the matter of sport that one cannot exclude the element of comradeship in the intercourse between the sexes. It is just here that it has won its most extensive and astonishing victories. It would be possible to apply a variation of Buckle’s famous dictum with regard to the ethical mission of the locomotive by declaring that the bicycle has done more for the emancipation of woman than all the strivings of the entire woman’s movement taken together.

Sport, according to Frau Mayreder, is one of the “disguised, revolutionary elements,” that are surely working for the removal of those two useless “anachronisms,” the “housekeeper” and the “lady,” from the face of the earth. This sounds like the exaggerations of some brilliant British essayist.

And again—

Never before have the ordinary conceptions of femininity, of the imaginary “ideal woman,” been so imbecile as in the nineteenth century.

Fancy being on such familiar terms with all the centuries!

But these are mere forms of speech caught from too much reading of contemporary essays on the future of woman and the nature of modern man. Even the lightest of literary characters nowadays will toss the ages about in this manner and would think it the mark of a cowardly intellect if they did not say “all history shows.” No harm is meant; it is

merely by way of emphasis, a sort of sociological way of swearing. Social philosophies have to bluster a good deal in universals because they are so largely founded on omissions. So these huge generalities that fly about in the great sex conflict often contain only a few particulars. The hominist who would save the world from an irruption of gyneco-crats is often merely fleeing from some single Mary Ann. But one soon learns to make allowances; and it is possible to read these things without loss of balance so long as one does not forget to extract the  $n$ th root of words that are obviously raised to the  $n$ th power. Otherwise giddiness will surely supervene, as happened to a young man last May who, on reading Frau Mayreder's book, wrote about it with great violence in the *English Review*. He said that not only had the lady disappeared, but the gentleman also, and what with sport, and education, and electricity, and eugenics, and the slit skirt, and the turkey trot, and "all America and all Paris and half England doing ragtime," it was plain that the Human Blush no longer blocked the way of woman's progress, and that, "creatively, Woman stands to-day unshackled!" Elated, but a little incoherent, he burst out now and then with such remarks as "Modesty—perhaps!" and "Virginity—consider!" Only one thing seemed to mar his pleasure. Personally he did not care for Frau Mayreder's "synthetic ideal." "Sex," he declared, "is and must be the greatest force in life, because life is entirely dependent on it." He thought he descried in Frau Mayreder's synthetic person a "lack of animalism, and consequently of vitality," and he attached great importance to vitality and believed that it ought to be preserved. "I love a great bouncing puppy," said he. "I love the vitality of man." But there was not the slightest need of his getting into any such condition had he but followed the simple rule I have mentioned.

F. M. COLBY.